

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A CALL FOR COMMUNITY PROPHETS

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The popular notion of a prophet is that of a figure out of religious history. A bearded man clothed in skins and staff in hand, standing on the side of a hill, denouncing the sins of the city below and foretelling the doom to come.

But this quaint figure had a very significant and dynamic relationship to his society. Let us see what it is and what were his qualities? Are they needed today?

- (1) The prophet had an aloofness and detachment from the present social scene. He was able to evaluate it -- to judge it, and found that what existed was not good enough.
- (2) The prophet knew where he was going. He possessed loyalty to a cause, courage and a sense of responsibility.
- (3) He had some knowledge and skill in realizing his objectives.

A community prophet would be one who was able to see and proclaim the value of community life to our world today. As Edwin L. Becker (Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin 178) has noted, community is a term broadly used and one "that calls men and sets them dreaming". The term community has described "everything from Christian Church around the world to a hive of industrious and well-integrated bees....So we hear of the 'business community', the 'artistic community', the 'engineering community'".

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Two distinct but related uses of the concept community should be pointed out. One is the focus on the sharing of tradition, the stress on fellowship such as the "community of believers". The other meaning defines community as a locality grouping. Thus the inhabitants of the given area have some identification with the place and usually act together in the common endeavors of life.

The community is a relatively small locality grouping. The term as commonly employed can be aptly applied to a population of several hundred but certainly means something entirely different in relation to a city of a half a million. In the latter situation there may exist a number of actual or potential communities. Students of the subject stress the necessity of extensive face-to-face relationship if community life is to exist. Individuals know each other, if not personally, at least they "understand" each other's way of life.

The Disintegration of Community

The community prophet is acutely aware that the situation today is not good. In fact, the forces causing the decline of the community for the past two centuries or more are not intensified. These forces are expressed in three major aspects of social organization--centralization, specialization and impersonal relationships. Centralization is seen both in the massing of population and in the tendency for important decisions to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. With respect to the former, for the last several decades in this country the number of small population centers, especially those under a thousand, has declined while the reverse has been true for the larger centers. Cities, especially their suburban areas, have grown rapidly. How much suburbia is conducive to the development of community life is a moot question.

The centralization of social control is also to be noted. Centralization of power and leadership is a major trend of our times. More and more the important decisions in economics, government and in the religious as well as other institutions are made not at the local but at the district, state and national levels. We look increasingly to big government, big business and the big city with its many other institutional centers as having the answer to our local problems.

Another aspect of centralization and the trend away from community is seen in the growth of the monolithic state. Robert Nisbet in his Quest for Community states that one of the most important social facts in our world today is the growing concentration of power in the "sovereign political state". The state has taken up the vacuum created by the decline of religious, kinship and locality groups. The decline of these groups -- of community has made ours an age of "frustration, anxiety, insecurity, disintegration, instability, breakdown" and collapse.

Baker Brownell in his Human Community finds a similar situation. A major source of the difficulty is centralization accompanied

by specialization. Says Brownell, "This public and private tendency toward indiscriminate centralization and mass control of life in fields of economics, corporative industry, technology, art, religion, politics, recreation, education, agriculture, and human affairs in general may well be a tendency toward death." (P. 6)

Extreme specialization in leisure time pursuits as well as occupationally leads to extensive social differentiation along interest, occupational, and class lines. In urban society it is in these groups not in the community that we "live and move and have our being". Individuals not "of our kind", although in close proximity, are known if at all not as whole persons but only in terms of a segment of their life, e.g., the clerk, the policeman, or one of the rush hour crowd. Psychologically lives become segmented and various parts or roles may or may not be integrated. Religion too may become a segment or isolated compartment rather than a qualifying factor in all experiences. Religion is apart from rather than a part of life.

Moral Imperative of Community

Yes, our community prophet has sufficient detachment from the present social scene so that he can see it for what it is. But he is not defeated by it; he knows a way out; he answers the call of the moral imperative to build community. He realizes the truth in Emil Brunner's statement that the Christian ethic is a personal ethic and must be realized in person-to-person relationships and groups--in the small community. Our community prophet also agrees with Reinhold Niebuhr and others that the tremendous concentration of power in the mass society (as contrasted with decentralization in many small communities) is a great source of evil in our day.

Development of a sense of moral imperative is essential if trends described above are to be reversed. Few of our moral and religious leaders appear to sense the issue involved here. Stated simply, it is that the ethical, psychological, political, and other goals in our Christian-democratic tradition are much more likely to be realized in the type of living we term community than they are to be gained in certain other types of social organization, especially the extreme urban type of life as we know it today. The realizing of community is not only a citizenship or economic goal; it is also a moral one.

This does not mean that the community prophet is impervious to the social and economic realities of the situation. He is not a blind devotee of a "community religion" as some of his critics charge. As the writer has pointed out in an earlier paper (Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin 112), if we are to keep the fruits of the machine, allow for flexibility and change, avoid a warping provincialism, we cannot return to the isolated rural community of yesterday. But at the same time this does not necessarily mean the increased massing of people in large central cities which defies economic efficiency and many other

Action of Christians in the Community. The greatest force for making the community more Christian are the Christ-like actions of men and women in their everyday activities--on the farm, at the store, in the courthouse. They have the challenge of bearing the Christian witness in the many community activities in which they participate, and in organizing for specific social action with like-minded folk.

Action Involving the Organized Church. Direct community action by the church presents it with the neat problem of "being in the world but not of it." If a church does not orient its members toward some type of community service its preachments may prove sterile. On the other hand, if it supports a specific policy or program, it may become a partisan among pressure groups. A fine balance must be maintained here for which there is no ready-made formula.

Some have sought a solution to this problem by organizing groups of church people to deal with specific social questions and to sponsor projects of an educational, welfare or economic nature. These action groups have little or no official contact with the organized church itself.

Church men as a body of believers seeking the will of God need somehow to keep this phase of their lives distinct from that in which they take part in social action and render community service. Only in this way can the church render its prophetic function of judging the community and at the same time supply needed service.

Content of a Community Program

These remarks should not be concluded without a word concerning the content of a program of community service. Perhaps the failure of churches to have a community oriented program has been more of a lack of knowledge of need and of program content and technique than it has been a lack of desire to render Christian service. Our community prophet in addition to his awareness of need and sense of direction must also possess a knowledge of strategy and program content. In other words, where do we begin to work and how is the job to be done?

A first step in answering this question is to provide what might be termed a social and ethical mapping of the community. The purpose is to provide information on the role of church and its constituency in the community and point up strategic areas of work. For the average town and country community, several areas of work are well known. A comprehensive ministry to youth is needed. The guidance of religion in making a home and in making a living demands continuous stress. Not the least of needs in most situations is that for effective cooperation between religious and community groups and among religious groups themselves. The best way to teach the worth of community life is to practice it through cooperative endeavors when they are called for.

The call for community prophets, then, is the call to realize the value of our local life--the value of community living. To accept this call as a challenge and moral imperative, and to be realistic with respect to procedure and program content.

highly prized values. Perhaps creative minds and spirits can blend the best of ruralism of yesterday with the world remade by the machine.

There is a moral imperative for building community which provides a situation for the development of whole persons, a basis for democratic freedom and order and the person-to-person relationships which are necessary for the expression of Christian love.

The small community is the place for the development of whole persons. The average person in our present day world is likely to be a member of several groups and publics which have conflicting expectations and values. The personal tensions created by conflicting standards as one moves from his family group, to play group, to work group, religious group and others are especially significant in the case of youth. This situation results from our highly segmented society of special interest groups and publics.

The great need is for some integration both to maintain the "Whole" personality and the social order. Many believe that strong, primary communities which have common expectations and values are necessary to realize these ends.

The community may provide a basis for democratic social order. In our world, order is threatened by powerful, special interest groups in conflict and democracy by the increasing concentration of power. This latter trend is characteristic of all of our institutions and the church is no exception. With the concentration of power and the growing complexity of functions, the task of the executive in a large bureaucracy or organization has become almost impossible.

We can agree, as history extensively demonstrates, that strong communal life does not guarantee democracy, but on the other hand can maintain that democracy cannot survive in our age without strong local units. The position of the decentralist is that in order to maintain democratic social order the maximum number of decisions as to the common life must be made at the local level.

Not only do psychological and social justifications exist for strong community life but there is strong ethical support also. The center, the heart of a vital Christianity, some propose, is not in precepts but in the community of Christians. The Christian life comes to flower as it is given expression in the community.

Toward a Strategy of Community Service

Our community prophet is not only able to judge the present situation, and possesses loyalty to a cause which points the way out, but he also has some knowledge and skill in realizing the necessary objectives. He is interested in developing a strategy for creating community.

The church is only one of several groups which should and does have an interest in creating and improving community life. It

has been said that community development is everybody's business. A history of the community development movement in America reveals that a relatively large number of different groups and interests have been involved. These have included welfare, economic, political, educational as well as religious and other interests.

It is necessary here, however, to limit our concern to the role and contribution of the church in community development. A basic question is posed as to how the church may be in the community but not of it. Our prophet is aware of the traditional ways in which Christians have attempted to relate themselves to the community and the outside world. They have attempted to withdraw, to become a partisan in the social struggle or to follow a double standard of conduct--one for personal and another for public life.

It is realized that the church serves the community only through persons with strong, personal Christian commitments. The commitment gives directions but action must have content. Thus our prophet proposes that Christian social education is a central function of the church in serving the community.

Christian Social Education. This involves teaching Christians ideals or values, evaluating existing institutions and programs in light of these goals, and suggesting the general direction ("middle axioms") toward which Christians should work in community reconstruction. This teaching should be done both in season and out of season and through every media at the church's command. When a church carries on this program vigorously it becomes, as it should ever be, the conscience of the community.

Social cleavages of various types, although generally not as sharp as in urban life, are common in town and country communities. These often result either in latent hostility or in open conflict. The church in carrying out its function of social education has a ministry of reconciliation to perform. It can insist that all the facts be openly presented and that an attitude of tolerance and fair play be maintained in making a judgment from them.

Christian social education would be sterile unless it resulted in action. Three avenues for action are suggested: (1) Action within the church itself, (2) action of Christians in the community, and (3) action involving the organized church within the community.

A Model of Christian Organization. A most important function that the church can perform is to set an example of Christian organization. It is well recognized that example is at least equally as valuable as preachment. Among other things this task is to mitigate, and wipe out inasmuch as possible the tensions and cleavages which the church accepts from its community. Another objective should be to get widespread participation of the membership in conducting the religious organization.